



Emergence by TheVeteran

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Summary: Starts right after the end of Stranger Things 2. The Gate is closed and everyone is safe. Eleven settles into her new life, Mike and the gang recover from their latest adventure, and Hawkins returns to being a normal quiet town. But how long will things stay quiet? (Mileven, Lumax, Jopper)

1. The Hoppers

~X~

Emergence

The Hoppers

Eleven was nervous. Very nervous. But not like the nervousness she felt before walking into a facility full of monster dogs and closing the Gate to another dimension. No, this was different. This was the Snow Ball Dance. This was her first real night with Mike in almost a year, and the very thought of him made her whole body feel weird.

Every part of her tingled and her chest felt tight. Was this normal? She didn't know what to make of it, and it further heightened her nervousness. She bit her lip, tasting a little of the lipstick that Chief Jim Hopper had reluctantly gotten for her after consulting with Joyce Byers on the matter. It was supposed to taste like cherries, which was apparently some kind of food that she had never had before. It tasted nice enough.

"Hello? Jane? Elle? Are you listening to me?" asked the Chief, glancing over at her in the passenger seat of his truck, a Chevy K5 Blazer.

They were on their way to Hawkins Middle School for the Snow Ball Dance, the roads dark and quiet in the sleepy town. She had counted one other car driving on the road, and it was going the other direction.

"Sorry," she apologized as she was brought out of her thoughts. She looked back at him then down at her feet.

Returning his gaze to the road ahead, Jim smiled knowingly. "Nervous?"

She nodded then repeated him, "Nervous." If only he knew how much.

"That's normal," he said, somewhat amused, "But don't worry, it'll pass. Just... just focus on being yourself and having fun and you'll be fine. Got it?"

She looked at him, feeling the slightest bit of relief from his words. "This is normal?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, trust me kid. This is very normal. I remember the first time I went to a dance like this," he recalled, shaking his head as the memories came to him, "I asked Stacy Maxwell to go with me and she actually said yes. She was pretty back then, and I was... well, I was alright-looking I guess. God that was a long time ago," his eyes briefly had a wistful look in them.

He didn't want to tell Eleven that he had originally asked Joyce Byers to the dance, but at the time Joyce had unfortunately already been asked by someone else before him. "Anyway, on the way to the dance I was so nervous I felt like throwing up, and I think I even asked my parents if I could just stay home. But thankfully they didn't let me."

Eleven's lips twitched into the slightest of smiles. "Did you throw up?"

He looked at her and gave her his trademark toothless grin, amusement twinkling in his eyes. Shrugging, he said, "Maybe a little."

"Gross."

He laughed, and Eleven couldn't help but join him. "Yeah, I guess it was pretty gross. I asked my parents to stop the car and threw up a little on the side of the road. Thankfully, I hadn't eaten that much for dinner, so only a little bit came out. I was lucky that there were some mints in the car that I used to get the taste of vomit out of my mouth."

"Mints?"

"It's a type of candy. Makes your breath and your mouth taste good for when you ki... uhhh... you know what, nevermind. It's a type of candy, alright?"

She looked at him expectantly but he didn't elaborate any further, and she ended up wondering if she needed a mint herself.

"Do I need a mint?" she asked uncertainly.

"No!" came the quick reply, "Definitely not." He didn't have any on him anyways.

They pulled up to the school then, Jim bringing the truck right to the doors of the gym. No one was outside, the dance well underway as evidenced by the muffled sounds of the music playing from inside.

Eleven started tensing up pretty badly, her breathing quickening as she read the banner taped to the side of the exterior wall.

'SNOW BALL' was drawn in large lettering using blue paint, the 'O' drawn into some kind of symbol that she didn't recognize.

Jim noticed her tense up. "Hey, look at me," he urged her.

She complied, her eyes so wide with innocent nervousness that Jim could scarcely believe she was capable of killing inter-dimensional beasts with only her mind. She looked even more nervous than when they went into Hawkins Lab for the last time, which he found somewhat amusing. Fighting terrifying monsters was apparently easier than going to a dance.

"Relax, Jane. Relax and take some deep breaths," he said as soothingly as he could, giving her a big toothy smile. "There's really nothing serious to get so worked up about. You're here to have fun with your friends, right?"

She nodded, smiling back at him weakly. Closing her eyes for a moment and taking a few long breaths, she tried to relax like he said. When her eyes opened again, she was a little calmer, but still noticeably tense. It was hard not to be.

She kept worrying that maybe Mike wouldn't find her pretty right now. Maybe she did her makeup wrong, or this was an ugly dress. What if he had liked the look Kali and her friends had given her when Mike first saw her again? A more troubling thought crossed her mind then: what if Mike was with another girl? Like that time she went to see him and he was in that gym with that redhead Max. He didn't know she was coming to the dance after all.

Her hands balled into fists at the thought.

"You know," Jim said, pausing for effect, "You don't have to do this if you don't want to. If you want, I can turn us around and we can drive straight back home. We can maybe watch TV and eat some ice cream. I think there might even still be some extra candy from Halloween too."

Eleven shook her head almost immediately. "Snow Ball," she said simply, looking a bit alarmed that he would even suggest doing something else that evening. She had to be here. She had to see Mike.

Jim grinned again. She could be so adorable even when she didn't mean to be. "Okay, well since you're staying, remind me what we talked about if somebody were to ask you who you are," he said.

She looked right at him. "I'm Jane Elle Hopper and I'm thirteen years old."

"And if they say they don't remember me having a daughter named Jane?"

"I was recently... adopted," she responded, finding the right word.

"Good," he said approvingly. He took a deep breath. "Well, we're already late so you should get in there then before it ends," he made a show of looking at his watch.

She was out the door and walking into the building in an instant after that, though not before saying a quick thank you to him as she slid out of the truck.

"Have fun, kiddo," he said to no one in particular as he watched her walk in.

Eleven walked right through the entrance, not bothering to check-in like kids were supposed to with Mr. Clarke, who was thankfully distracted by a kid throwing up in the corner. She briefly wondered if that kid was throwing up because he was so nervous like Jim Hopper said he was when he was their age.

She pushed the heavier-than-it-looked door to the gym and found

herself beneath three arches of baby blue and white balloons.

The music was so loud and there were lights and streamers and other decorations everywhere. And people. There were so many people in one place. Children her age, some younger and some older, most of them dancing in the middle of the gym. A few glanced in her direction. Her eyes settled on what looked like little trees with lights, a few of them placed purposefully around the gym. She found it odd that they would have trees indoors, though weird as they were they did look rather nice all lit up.

A new song started playing then.

~Every breath you take...~

Her eyes scanned the crowd, looking for Mike. It took her only a few seconds to find him sitting by himself at an empty table off to the side. Relief flooded her as she saw that he wasn't with another girl, which she was incredibly happy about.

In a heartbeat, he was looking right at her, almost in shock as he shot up to his feet.

When their eyes met Eleven could feel her whole body tingling again. Her heart started pumping faster, her breathing getting shorter.

She smiled at him, slowly and nervously, and she could have sworn her heart skipped a beat when he smiled right back at her. Her legs started moving on their own as she walked over, and he started walking towards her as well, their eyes never leaving each other as if the other one would disappear if they looked anywhere else.

Eleven didn't know what to say as they met, staring into each other's eyes.

Mike looked like was going to say something, stopped and fidgeted a little, then said, "Y-You look beautiful." He meant it, his eyes scanning her face, her hair, and her new dress. She had changed her look again. When he saw her as she stood by the door, framed by the balloon arches, it had taken his breath away.

Gone was the punk makeup and edgy look that she had first returned

with, replaced with a more cute and wholesome look. Not that he had minded her punk appearance. Honestly, she could probably wear anything and he would still find her beautiful.

Eleven couldn't believe what she was hearing. She had been called pretty before, but now she was more than that. She was beautiful. Mike said she looked beautiful! She looked down briefly, embarrassed but beyond happy, and then looked back up at Mike, unable to speak. She felt that tingling sensation all over again, accompanied by a growing warmth and all sorts of sensations she hadn't really experienced before, but it all felt good.

~Every single dayyy...~

Mike blinked and looked around. "Do you want to dance?" he asked nervously. He felt his palms getting a little sweaty and he wiped them on his pants, hoping they would keep dry.

She glanced at the other kids dancing near them. "I... don't know how," she stated bluntly, unsure. She had seen dancing on the television shows she had seen before and Jim Hopper had danced in front of her a few times to music from that record player, but she had never actually done it herself. And this was a different type of dancing than the ones she had seen.

"I don't either," Mike replied with a shrug, "Do you want to figure it out?" he asked smoothly, surprising even himself.

She could only nod.

Mike reached for her hand and she instinctively grabbed onto his. He lead her into the middle of the dance floor, finding a spot with enough space for the two of them.

"I think you're supposed to go like this," he explained as he pulled her hands up to his shoulders and she nodded, both of them glancing at the other couples dancing around them for reference.

"Yeah, like that," he said with a smile as she moved her hands up some more to get a better hold of him. He placed his hands on her hips, and she smiled back at him as they moved closer together.

Neither of them knew who started swaying first, or if they started swaying together simultaneously, but soon enough they were apparently dancing and completely oblivious to everyone around them. The two of them lost in their own world.

"I missed you, El. I missed you so much," Mike said softly, trying to articulate the emptiness he had felt for the past year.

Her smile widened even more than she thought possible, and it was still not a proper reflection of the joy she felt inside. "I missed you too, Mike." She noted that he smelled different today, nicer somehow.

"Well, now we'll see each other all the time, right? Now that you're going to live with Hopper?"

Eleven nodded vigorously. "Yes."

~I feel so cold and I long for your embrace...~

"Good. I don't ever want to lose you again," he repeated the words he had said to her right before she went off to the lab to close the Gate.

That had been a little more than a month ago, but she remembered every moment she had with Mike.

"You won't," she said seriously, "I promised you won't lose me."

They continued to sway, never looking away from each other and not realizing that they had been inching even closer. Eleven's hands were clasped behind Mike's neck at this point and they were staring into each other's eyes, feeling connected. Feeling whole.

~I keep crying, baby, baby, pleeeaaassee...~

Mike couldn't resist it anymore. He went in for a kiss, his lips meeting her soft ones firmly. She tasted like cherries. It was only a second, but it felt like time stood still for a while. Then it was over. His cheeks were burning, but it had felt good. It had felt right.

She blinked, eyes going wide as saucers, feeling suddenly weak. Mike sensed it and strengthened his grip on her hips to steady her. She breathed in suddenly, realizing that she had been holding her breath,

and then she swallowed hard as she looked up into Mike's warm dark eyes with a growing smile.

"Are you... okay?" he asked with a worried tone. Panic filled his eyes. "I'm sorry, was it... was it that bad?" he braced himself to hear the worst, already grimacing.

"No, Mike," she said as firmly as she could muster, staring deep into his eyes, "It was amazing."

~*You belong to meeee...*~

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Eleven watched from the doorway of her room as Hawkins Police Chief Jim Hopper, now her adoptive father, carried the small pine tree into their home. Even though the tree was small, it was big enough that he had a bit of trouble getting it through the door, but once inside he pushed some of the furniture away with his legs and plopped it in the middle of the cabin.

A little bit out of breath, he took a few steps back and wiped some of the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He was in a red and black flannel shirt, jeans, and hiking boots, having taken the morning off from work so he could get the tree and lights done.

"What is that?" she asked, remembering the lit-up trees inside the school gym during the Snow Ball Dance a few days ago. The thought of the dance made her blush and she reached a hand up to her mouth, a finger tracing her lips.

"That," Jim said as he looked at the tree, "Is a Christmas tree."

"A Christmas tree?"

"Yeah. Well, it's not uhh... it's not really a Christmas tree yet actually," he scratched his beard. "We need to put some lights on it first," he clarified, "Trust me, it'll look a lot better with lights."

Eleven looked at the tree then back at Jim. "What is Christmas?"

"Oh, right. You've never actually had Christmas before, have you?"

said Jim, remembering that he had found her in the woods right after Christmas a year ago.

Thankfully before New Year's Eve though. She wouldn't have known about what goes on that night and he could only imagine how terrified she would have been of the explosions from all the fireworks. He ran a hand through his thinning hair as he thought of how best to explain the holiday to her.

"Okay," he began, "What is Christmas? Christmas is... a very special day where people celebrate how much they love each other by giving gifts and spending extra time together."

"Gifts?" she repeated with a frown.

"Gifts are-"

She gave him a look as she cut him off. "I know what gifts are." Her mind flashed back to the very rare occasions she would get a gift from papa. A stuffed animal. Some crayons. The thought of him both saddened and angered her, and she forced herself not to think about him.

Her thoughts instead went to Mike and her friends, wondering if they had gifts for her for Christmas. Knowing them, they probably did. Especially Mike. She was sure Mike would give her a gift. But what could she give them? She didn't have anything.

"Okay," he looked at her quizzically, "Then what's with the frown, kiddo?"

"I... I love my friends," she began, putting some thought into her words, "but I have no gifts for them... for this Christmas." She looked at Jim, realizing she didn't have a gift for him either.

"Huh," Jim said, stroking his beard in thought. "Well, I suppose that's a bit of a problem," he sighed, "Though you don't necessarily *need* to give your friends gifts. I mean, do you even know what you want to give them?"

Eleven shook her head, her frown deepening. This was really troubling her. She had never had to think about giving gifts before.

Then again, she had never really had the luxury of thinking about a lot of things. Maybe she could give them each a box of Eggos? She definitely had plenty of Eggos. But no, they probably all already had Eggos. In fact, she knew that Mike definitely had Eggos at his house, having consumed them there for the first time a year ago.

So what else could she give them?

"Alright, well as much as I'd like to take you out shopping, I think it would be best if you laid low for a while. The Snow Ball was one thing, but this? This isn't worth risking your safety over," said Jim as he walked over to her and placed a hand gently on her head, ruffling her hair a bit. "Understand?"

As expected, she gave him a look that told him she fully disagreed with what he was saying.

"I'm not done," he said, raising a hand up to calm her, "How about this for a compromise? You think of what gifts you want to give to your friends and then I go out and get them for you. Then I'll bring them back here and we can wrap them together. What do you think about that?"

Eleven wasn't exactly happy about it, but she understood that he was trying to help. She also knew that she needed to stay at home for a while and, as he had put it, lay low. She nodded reluctantly in acceptance. "Compromise."

"Good. It's a deal then," he said with a satisfied smile. He turned around and walked back to inspect the tree, walking around the entire thing and moving it around every so often to get it into the right position. He started muttering to himself about something that Eleven didn't quite catch, not that she was trying to.

"When is Christmas?" she asked, leaning against the door frame and clasping her hands down together in front of her.

"In a week," he replied, moving the tree some more, "So you should tell me what gifts you want to give by tomorrow or the day after at the latest so I have enough time to get them."

"Okay." She chewed on her bottom lip and hoped she could figure out gifts in time. Maybe she could get them some of those things she saw on the TV.

"Alright, now that that's settled, I'll be right back. Gotta get the lights from my truck." He stepped out of the cabin.

When he returned, he had a few boxes of white Christmas lights with him, and Eleven had migrated to the couch. She was deep in thought as she stared at the bare Christmas tree in the middle of the room, trying to come up with gifts to give her friends. She had decided she would give one each to the boys. Will, Lucas, Dustin, and of course Mike. She would also give one to Joyce and one to her new dad.

Jim set the boxes down on the coffee table that he had moved out of the way for the tree and started opening one up.

The movement and noise drew Eleven's attention, bringing her out of her thoughts for a moment. She watched him opening up the box of lights and it occurred to her that there was one wrinkle with the compromise they had agreed to. Her dad would see whatever gift she decided to get for him. So she would have to get him his gift some other way. But how?

It struck her then. She was trying to get a gift for her dad. The thought was strange to her.

She had been reluctant to call him papa, the very word itself triggering so much conflicting emotions and terrible memories that she wouldn't mind never using that word ever again. She remembered how hurt her adoptive father was when she had compared him to papa, saying that he was "just like papa" during their big argument that ended with her powers going wild and all the windows blowing up.

Perhaps remembering that moment and also understanding everything attached to that word, he had told her it would probably be best if she just called him dad. Although if she didn't want to call him that, he mentioned to her that she was also free to call him Hopper too, or even just Jim if she wanted.

She wasn't quite sure yet what she was comfortable using to call him, so most of the time she didn't really say anything. And for the most part he didn't pressure her to call him anything either, which was nice. They were both still trying to figure this whole thing out.

This whole thing being their now official father-daughter relationship.

She recalled her stunned silence when he sat her down and explained to her what had happened. How that wounded doctor, Dr. Owens, they had encountered in the stairwell of the lab had somehow pulled off the impossible and helped Jim adopt Eleven officially. How from now on she would have a father, a proper caring father, and that they would be family. Forever.

Jim promised that he would do everything in his power to take care of her and protect her, especially from the bad men. He promised that he would do his best to be a good dad. He was on the verge of tears when he had looked her squarely in the eyes and confessed that it would not be easy for either of them, him most of all. He had a lot of baggage from everything that happened with his daughter Sarah, and everything that happened afterwards. But he had said that for Eleven, for Jane, he was willing to try to be a father again.

She had cried in her adoptive father's arms after hearing all of it. Tears of joy, of disbelief, and of hope. Not only did she have friends, but now she actually had family. She was Eleven, and she would always be Eleven, but now she was also Jane Elle Hopper too.

When she asked about her mother, Terry Ives, her new dad had explained that the same doctor who helped them was now having her treated at another facility since the Hawkins Lab was closed. He was optimistic that they could bring her back to normal, but warned that it would take time and that they would need to be patient.

Her aunt, Becky Ives, was apparently still living at the house on 515 Larrabee Road and regularly checking in on her sister at the facility she was being treated at. Jim had given her a call and informed her of his adoption of Jane and sparingly gave details of the situation surrounding the danger that the young girl was in.

That meant Becky couldn't visit them in Hawkins, and vice versa, at least for a while. But when it was safe enough, which apparently would be about another year according to Dr. Owens, things could be more normal and they could visit each other.

Becky had been relieved to hear that the young girl was okay and that the Police Chief was going to take care of her. Although she was disappointed she wouldn't be able to see her niece until next year, she understood why it was necessary.

Everything was finally looking up.

"Hey, are you going to sit there all day or are you going to come help me out with these lights?" Jim said as he stopped unraveling the bundle of lights in his hands to look at her.

Eleven sighed then crossed her legs on the couch, propping her elbows on her knees and resting her hands on her chin, watching him with a barely restrained grin.

"Ha, ha, very funny," he said as he gently threw the bundle of lights at her. "Come on, it's a Hopper family tradition to decorate and light the tree together."

She leaned back on impulse, her reflexes quick enough for her to catch the bundle of lights before they hit her face. "Family tradition?"

Jim nodded slowly. "That's right. Family tradition," he stopped to think for a moment.

"Traditions are activities that are passed down from parents to children, from one generation to the next. So I used to do this with my parents, and when I became a parent I did this with... with Sarah," he paused for a moment, blinking and swallowing hard. He always had a difficult time talking about Sarah.

It took him a few seconds to compose himself enough to continue, "So uhh... You know, now that you're officially a Hopper and all, we're going to start off our first Christmas together properly. Let's get into the Christmas spirit, alright? So get off your lazy bum and let's get to lighting this tree!" he said with genuine enthusiasm, grabbing another

box of lights to open.

Amused at his excitement over putting lights on a tree, Eleven got to her feet. "Okay *dad*."

2. Gloves Off

~X~

Emergence

Gloves Off

Scott Clarke was a man of science. He firmly believed that human curiosity and a proper understanding of science were the keys to a better, brighter future for all mankind. In the right hands, or perhaps more appropriately in the right minds, scientific knowledge could solve or at least help to solve any problem.

Science made the impossible possible, that was a fact. Technology had advanced pretty far over the years since he was a kid. There were these amazing machines called computers now. Then there were handheld radio communicators and pocket calculators, to name a few more things he didn't have growing up. It was science that created all of those things. It was science that allowed humanity to communicate with each other from halfway around the globe, to explore the deep depths of the ocean, and to walk on the moon hundreds of thousands of miles into outer space.

It was a great time to be alive, and an even greater time to be involved with science. And yet, growing up he found himself one of what seemed to be only a handful of students who were truly excited by the subject. There was a significant lack of interest in science in the American education system that baffled him. This realization was what led him to want to become a science teacher in the first place.

Like most people, he dreamed of somehow changing the world, and he strongly believed that teaching was his chance to do that. He wanted to share the wonders and potential of science with as many people as he could, especially the younger generations. They were the future after all, and a future with more science was a better future indeed.

He himself had been a student here at Hawkins Middle many years

ago and was well aware that most science teachers were typically dry and boring. Their lessons as enjoyable as licking sandpaper. Ms. Ratliffe, in particular, was exceptionally awful. He actually understood why his classmates would be turned off by science because of teachers like her.

Ms. Ratliffe coincidentally was retiring the year that he was looking for a job, opening up a chance for him to teach science in his hometown. The timing of it all suggested to him that somehow this was all meant to be.

He had only been teaching for a few years at Hawkins Middle School, and so far it had not been quite what he was expecting. He had come into the job with high hopes that his more vibrant and involved methods of teaching would really reach more students and get them excited about the natural wonders of science.

Mr. Clarke, as he came to be known, was going to be better than any science teacher that had ever taught in Hawkins. He was supposed to do the impossible: make science cool and fun so that kids would be driven to excel at it. And coming off of the heels of Ms. Ratliffe, there were very low expectations from the school administration for him as a teacher. So far, he had been experimenting with various ways to get the kids more excited, but his new methods haven't exactly been producing the results he was hoping for.

Most of his students, no matter how interesting the material or how much energy and enthusiasm he brought to the classes, simply didn't seem to care. They treated his class like any other science class before them. They thought that he didn't notice them passing notes, playing games, or doodling on their notebooks. Some even fell asleep or zoned out, trailing drool from their mouths. Others kept glancing at the clock on the wall, counting down the minutes.

It was, truth be told, quite disheartening to say the least. And he would have likely either quit or moved to another school had it not been for a select few of his students who really shined in and out of the classroom.

Mike Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Dustin Henderson, and Will Byers were at the top of that very short list of star students. They reminded him

of himself at their age. Smart, eager, and carefree. They were nerds, and proud of it, and he in turn was proud of them. Though unlike these kids, back when he was their age he only had one other friend who shared that same excitement for science. As they say, the more the merrier.

Ever since Halloween, Mr. Clarke had noticed something was off with his star pupils. They seemed distracted; their energy in class appeared to be lower than normal; and they were participating less frequently, which was rough for him because their class was his best class to teach. Their class was the final period of the day, and it was the one he looked forward to teaching the most.

To be fair, lately they had been doing better, but still there seemed to be something amiss. He had some ideas as to why they were acting strange, but he wasn't one to pry so he never asked them outright. Regardless, he had a plan that would hopefully get them back on track.

"Good afternoon class," he greeted them with his usual enthusiasm right after the bell rang, indicating that the period had started. "Welcome to another exciting chapter on our curiosity voyage!" He clapped his hands together and gave them a big smile. As usual, the only ones who returned his enthusiasm were his best students, though noticeably subdued as he had been witnessing lately.

"I've been thinking a lot about the way I've planned out our lessons this year, and I've decided to switch some things around and give you all an early Christmas present."

That got their attention. Some of the kids looked concerned, perhaps thinking that there was some kind of test coming up, but his star pupils all shared excited looks of genuine curiosity.

"We were supposed to do this section after the holiday break, partly because some of the necessary materials were to be delivered then, but I happened to know a guy who knows a guy and, well..." He paused for effect, "Suffice it to say that I managed to get the materials delivered extra early. And it just so happens that they arrived earlier today!" he explained with growing enthusiasm, looking around at the faces of his students.

Their expressions ranged from growing fear and nervousness to genuine enthusiasm and curiosity.

"Now, I'm sure you're all wondering what on this beautiful Earth is Mr. Clarke talking about," he continued, dragging it on a little more to really get their excitement up. "Well, I can assure you that it's something none of you have ever done before."

"What is it, Mr. Clarke? What is it?" Lucas blurted out, unable to contain himself.

"Please tell me it's what I think it is," Dustin added eagerly, leaning forward and crossing his fingers. "Please, please, pleeease..." he murmured, though it was loud enough for everyone to hear.

Mike's and Will's eyes were wide with anticipation, both of them leaning forward in their chairs. Even though they said nothing, Mr. Clarke could tell they were just as excited as their friends.

It was working. He had them. Hook, line, and sinker. With a victorious grin, he said, "Today, class, we're going to be dissecting frogs!"

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The bell rang.

"Alright class, that's all for today. We'll finish up the second part of the dissections tomorrow. Please put away your masks and goggles and make sure to properly store your frogs and dispose of your gloves in the correct bin on your way out. And don't forget to wash your hands, just in case!" Mr. Clarke called out, but half the class was already heading for the door, not bothering to put their partially dissected frogs away like he asked.

Some of them at least put away their goggles and masks, and a handful put their frogs away properly. He let out a small sigh that went largely unnoticed.

"This is so cool," Dustin started saying, "I mean, it's gross and smells kinda bad, but it's also cool."

"Yeah, this is pretty cool," Lucas admitted, "But also weird. Because these frogs used to be alive and all."

Dustin grabbed his dissecting tray and went to store it, speaking as he did so. "You know I heard that one time one of the frogs was actually still alive, and it started moving after they had already opened it up!"

"No way!" said Will, face screwing in disgust.

Mike shuddered at the thought and Lucas looked like he was going to throw up. Mike looked to Mr. Clarke, who was still staring with arms crossed and a defeated look at the last of the students filing out the door.

"Don't worry Mr. Clarke, we'll help you clean up," offered Mike. "Won't we guys?" he said, nudging Will and looking expectantly at Dustin and Lucas.

Dustin turned to Mr. Clarke and gave him a sweeping bow, "We're at your service, milord!" He had been arguably the most excited out of all his friends for the dissection lab, and he also arguably liked Mr. Clarke the most.

"I'll help too," said Max, the redhead who was a new student this year and who was now their newest friend too. She eyed all the dissecting trays and the frogs that were pinned and opened up on them. "Even though this is all pretty disgusting."

"Why, thank you boys. And you too Maxine," said Mr. Clarke with a smile.

"It's just Max," she reminded him, eliciting a swift apology from the teacher. "It's fine," she assured him, telling him that it happens a lot and not to worry about it.

Mr. Clarke took stock of what needed to be done around the lab. "Now, how about you guys put away all the goggles and masks laying about. Dispose of any used gloves and put all the dissecting tools in the sink so I can wash them once we're done with everything else," he told them as he went around to take care of the frogs himself. Not that he didn't trust them with the partially dissected frogs, but he

wanted to minimize the risk of any accidents happening.

For a couple of minutes they did as instructed in an orderly manner, but kids being kids, they decided to have a little fun while they were at it. As they collected some of the dirty gloves that the other kids just tossed on the tables or on the ground, Lucas, who was fond of using slingshots, having one of his own called 'The Wrist-Rocket', decided to fling the gloves at his friends by pulling on them like a sling.

The closest target to him was Mike, who managed to block the incoming glove by raising his hand, though this resulted in him getting slime all over the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Ugh, what the hell, Lucas!" he shouted in surprise. Then his lips twisted into a mischievous grin. "This means war!" he yelled as he proceeded to fire back with one of the gloves that he was holding. Lucas dodged it and fired off another that missed Mike wide.

Will and Dustin looked at each other for a second and then joined in as well, the lab becoming a bit of a free-for-all with gloves flying everywhere.

Mr. Clarke being Mr. Clarke, he let it go on a little longer than most teachers probably would, glad that his students were finally getting some of that youthful energy back. Even though it was not necessarily for science in this case.

Thankfully, he had managed to get all the frogs stored before they started their little battle so those were safe. He observed for a moment with a barely contained smile while he made sure to stay clear of the firing lines. He held a binder close in front of him in case he needed to use it as a shield for any stray projectiles.

Max tried to get out of the way, saying she didn't want any part of this melee. She moved to the front of the classroom near where Dustin was and away from the crossfire.

Will managed to duck under a table just as a couple of gloves flew right through the air where he had been standing. He had fired off all the used gloves he had and was now without any weapons. Crouching low to the ground, he buried his face in his arms to protect

it from any potential incoming projectiles, laughing as he yelled out that he yielded and was out of the fighting.

That left Mike, Dustin, and Lucas.

Mike managed to get a few good shots on Lucas and Dustin during the initial fighting, but was now being double-teamed by the two from both sides.

"Not fair! Not fair!" he yelled as they continued to pelt his position. There were a few more goo marks on his jacket before he too decided to wave the white flag. He was laughing the whole time though, enjoying the fight while it lasted.

The remaining two combatants were on opposite sides of the classroom at that point, both hiding behind tables and were down to their last pair of gloves. Before things could escalate further, as the very end of play fights tend to sometimes, Mr. Clarke decided to finally step in.

"Alright guys, war's over. Now please clean everything up before you leave," Mr. Clarke said with amusement.

Dustin immediately raised his hands and stood up.

Unfortunately, Lucas was already midway through shooting one of his remaining gloves off and was unable to stop it as it flew out of his hands and across the classroom towards Dustin, who had enough time to duck. It barely missed him as it flew over his head, but that meant it kept sailing across the room.

"Watch out!" Mike yelled, realizing where it was going a second before Lucas' eyes widened as he too realized what was about to happen. Dread filled him almost immediately.

The used glove hit, splattered, and partially stuck onto Max's hair. She had been facing away from the glove at the time so hadn't seen it coming, and Mike's warning was a second too late so she didn't have time to duck or move out of the way either. She staggered a little from the hit, more out of shock than actually being hit hard enough to be moved like that.

Mr. Clarke watched the scene unfold with a grimace. Things were about to get even messier.

The classroom was dead silent as Max slowly reached up and behind her head to where the glove was hanging off of her hair. She pulled it away, the sticky goo getting onto her fingers as she turned around and looked at it in growing horror.

"Ew, ew, ew, ew..." she repeated in growing alarm as she pulled it off of her. She stared at the disgusting latex projectile for what seemed like an eternity, as if trying to will it away and not believing this was actually happening. Then her stare instantly cut to Lucas, who was standing frozen across the room with the guiltiest and most terrified look on his face.

Both of his arms were up, palms open towards her. "I am so sorry, Max. I-I didn't mean to... It was just... I was just..." he began, trailing off as her expression slowly morphed into furious anger, making him gulp. If looks could kill, he would have been obliterated on the spot.

Max took an audibly loud deep breath and looked like she was about to say or do something, but stopped. She glanced at Mr. Clarke, realizing that there was a teacher present, and then practically stomped out of the lab, throwing the offending glove into the bio-waste bin by the door with a loud SHWACK.

"Ohhh shit! Lucas, you are so dead," Dustin said matter-of-factly as they all turned their gazes from the door to Lucas. "So, so dead."

"Language," chided Mr. Clarke.

Mike glared at Dustin. "Not. Helping!" he growled.

"I didn't mean... It was an accident... I-" Lucas started to panic, eyes wide and searching the faces of his friends for some guidance. "What do I do? What do I do?"

Mike swallowed hard, feeling bad for his friend. He knew what he had to do. Setting his jaw, Mike leveled a serious stare at his friend. "Damn it, Lucas!" he stated adamantly, slamming his palm on the nearest tabletop. "This is no time to panic!"

Will stumbled out from underneath the table that Mike slammed his palm on, surprised for a moment by the sudden noise. "I'm okay!" he said, noticing their quick looks of concern after he sprawled out a bit on the floor. He got to his feet and brushed off some dirt. Somehow, he had managed to avoid any of the goo getting onto his clothes from the impromptu glove battle. Though the same couldn't be said for his friends, who had specks of slime all over their clothes.

Turning his attention back to Lucas, Mike said, "You need to run after her right now and apologize! And I mean, right now."

"W-What?" Lucas said, looking every bit as frightened as he should be.

Mr. Clarke chimed in. "Mike's right, Lucas. You should apologize."

"But he just said I was already dead!" exclaimed Lucas as he gestured towards Dustin, who threw his hands up in the air.

"What does that have to do with apologizing to Max?" Dustin yelled back.

"Shut up!" Mike yelled at Dustin. Sometimes Dustin talked too much.

"Well, I already apologized didn't I?!" Lucas said loudly, his voice tightening. She had not been receptive to the apology. Far from it. "Did you see the way she looked at me?!"

"Why are we all yelling?!" shouted Dustin.

Mike shook his head, refraining from acknowledging what Dustin said because he clearly was not trying to help, and then he grabbed and pushed Lucas towards the door. "Then apologize again! Run after her. NOW!"

"But-"

"NOW, LUCAS!"

Lucas made for the door but stopped and looked back at them, conflicted. Part of him was afraid that Max was really going to kill him.

Mike made a shooing motion with both his arms, giving his friend a look that basically told him to do it or else.

Will tried to gave him a supportive smile, though he wasn't sure if it came out right.

Dustin was only shaking his head, mouth slightly open.

Confused and frightened as he was, Lucas finally ran out the door to find Max.

The remaining party members all looked at each other.

"He's so dead," Dustin repeated as he continued to shake his head. "Dead, I tell you."

Mike sighed and rolled his eyes.

Will had a concerned look on his face. "Should we help him find Max?" he looked towards Mike and then at Dustin. "I mean, I don't know what we can do if we do find her but... doesn't Lucas need our support?"

Dustin looked unsure. "I don't think we can help him with this one, buddy... can we?" He turned to Mike.

"No," Mike said firmly. He didn't really know how he knew, but he knew that Lucas needed to do this himself. "We can't help him in this quest right now. Maybe we can do something later, but right now he's gotta do this part on his own."

Mr. Clarke cleared his throat and the three boys turned to him with guilty looks, having forgotten for a moment that he was even in the room. "Well boys, I understand the party is encountering some serious difficulties right now, but there is one problem you can help me solve." He pointedly looked around the lab and the extra mess they made.

"Right. Clean up duty," said Will, already grabbing some of the gloves nearest him.

"Your loyal subjects are very sorry, milord," added Dustin as he

looked around at all of the gloves and slime everywhere. "We have desecrated your kingdom."

"Yeah, sorry things got out of hand, Mr. Clarke," said Mike as he looked down at the floor guiltily, reaching up to scratch the back of his head and instantly regretting it as he got some of the slime on his own hair. "Ahh, gross! Damn it!"

Dustin and Will couldn't help but laugh.

Mr. Clarke smiled. "It's alright boys. As long as we clean it all up. So let's get to it, shall we? Then you can go check on your friends."

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Lucas sprinted down the hallway, mind racing faster than he was running, making him feel a little dizzy. He tried to ignore it though as he ran through the halls. He didn't know where Max could have gone, but he had to try and find her.

"Max!" he called out suddenly, startling the handful of students in the hallway he was in. They gave him annoyed looks as he ran past.

He burst through the doors that led to the fields out back.

"Maaaaxx!" he yelled as loud as he could, continuing to call out her name every now and then as he circled the school. He wasn't sure how long he had been searching, but it must have been at least a solid ten or fifteen minutes. Lucas still couldn't find her anywhere.

He had given up on finding her at that point, believing that she must have gone home or hidden somewhere where she didn't want to be found. At least he had tried. He was on the way back to the lab when it was Max who found him.

"Looking for me, stalker?" asked Max in an accusatory tone.

She had come out through the door leading into the girl's locker room by the gym, her arms crossed in front of her. She had on a seriously pissed off expression, her lips pressed into a thin line, blue eyes boring into him. Her hair was shiny and wet from washing the slime out of it, clothes a little damp. She seemed not to care that drops of

water were dripping down on her clothes.

"Max," he breathed, eyes going wide as he took a step back in surprise.

She started tapping her foot, still glaring at him.

He blinked at her, unsure of what to say at first. Then he remembered what Mike had said to him earlier. He needed to apologize again. "Max, I'm really really sorry about hitting you with that... uhh.. slimy glove," he made a face as he pictured the incident in his mind, "I didn't mean to do that... hit you with the glove, I mean, it was ummm... it was supposed to hit Dustin, but he ducked, and you were right behind him and I didn't think that it... well... yeah... anyways, I know that it wasn't cool, and I apologize. Can you please not kill me and forgive me instead?"

Max was still glaring at him when he finished talking, and she continued to remain silent for what seemed like an eternity.

"I'll think about it," she finally said, her glare softening.

"You'll... think about it?" He was half-smiling, looking at her like she was joking.

She nodded slowly, her expression serious. "Yeah, that's what I said."

"What does that mean?" asked Lucas, not understanding.

"Uh, it means I'll think about it," she said matter-of-factly, walking past him.

Lucas stared after her for a second and then started to follow her. "Max! What do you mean you'll think about it?"

She ignored him, though the effect of her walking away angrily was somewhat diminished by the squelching with each step of her left shoe, which was partially soaked with water.

"Max, please. I already said I was sorry, okay? And I meant it. Why are you still mad at me?"

She continued walking a step ahead of him.

"Come on, Max. It was an accident, you can't be *that* mad," he continued talking. "Can you?" he said quietly, more to himself as she kept silent.

Lucas flashed back to the advice his father had given him back when Max was first upset at him: Apologize, then give them what they want. While he had some reservations about always giving them what they want, it worked the first time and he figured it would work this time, so he gave it a shot.

He reached out and grabbed Max's arm to stop her, causing her to turn around and glare at him again.

"What is it, stalker?" she said with a huff of mild annoyance.

He was about to tell her that she needed to stop calling him that, especially in public, but decided that perhaps this was not the best time to have that discussion. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Max, listen. I'm really sorry-

"You've already said that," she cut him off, still annoyed, but he kept talking anyway.

"-and I want to make it up to you. I'll do whatever it takes to get you to forgive me. Okay? Whatever it takes."

Max looked at him sideways. "Are you serious?"

He gave her a slow nod. "Dead serious."

Her blue eyes scanned his face, looking for a sign that he might be lying or bluffing, but found none. His offer seemed genuine.

Her lips parted into a small smile. "Okay. There *is* something you could do..."

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"Thanks for helping, boys," said Mr. Clarke as he got his things together so that he could finally head home.

"You're most welcome, sire!" replied Dustin, who had just finished rinsing the last of the dissecting tools in the sink. He had insisted on doing that himself, adamant that Mr. Clarke not do any more work to clean up.

Mr. Clarke didn't want to argue so he allowed it as long as he supervised.

Mike and Will collected all the used gloves and threw them into the bio-waste disposal bin. They then wiped down practically the entire lab, which was a little more than Mr. Clarke expected of them, but again they had insisted and he didn't bother telling them otherwise.

Taking another look around to make sure everything was in order, he ushered the boys out.

Mike was carrying Lucas' backpack and Dustin shouldered Max's as they filed out of the lab. Their two friends still hadn't come back.

Locking the door to the lab, Mr. Clarke bade them farewell with a smile and left them standing in the hallway.

"Ugh... I don't want to clean anything else for at least another month," groaned Dustin as he put Max's stuff down and leaned against a locker.

"What happened to Lucas and Max?" Mike wondered aloud, looking down either side of the hallway, as if they were going to show up after he mentioned them.

Will looked uneasy. "We should probably go find them, you guys. They've been gone a while."

"How about we don't do that?" said Dustin. When they looked at him funny, he said, "What? I'd rather not find Lucas' corpse, okay?"

"I'm sure they're fine," Mike reassured Will, ignoring Dustin's comment. "The Gate's closed so there's no danger to worry about anymore."

Will nodded reluctantly, "I guess you're right."

"You guys better not be talking about me!" called Lucas' voice from the far end of the hallway.

"Lucas!" Will and Mike said in unison, big grins on their faces.

He smiled back, quickly walking over to them. Mike handed him his backpack and he put it on, thanking his friend for holding on to it for him.

"Son of a bitch. You're alive," Dustin said, keeping his mouth open in mock surprise.

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Dustin, would you please cut that out? I'm starting to think you actually want me dead," he said, looking at Dustin with narrowed eyes.

"You did mention not wanting to find Lucas' corpse," said Will. Mike nodded.

"Too far?" Dustin said with a sheepish grin, glancing around at his friends, then nodded and answered himself. "Alright, I guess I took it too far. Sorry about that. Sorry. I'll stop."

Lucas sighed.

"So what happened?" asked Mike, "Did you find Max?"

"Did she forgive you?" Will chimed in.

"Where is she, anyway? She left her bag here, you know," added Dustin, pointing to the bag that he had put down next to the locker he was leaning against.

"Yeah, I found her. But not immediately. Or I guess she actually found me instead. Anyways, it doesn't matter. We... uh... we need to talk, guys," he answered, his tone serious.

The school PA system blared to life right then. "William Byers. William Byers, your mother is out front waiting for you."

The group all looked at each other.

"We can walk and talk," Lucas suggested. He picked up Max's backpack and they started walking towards the front of the school.

"So what did you want to talk about Lucas?" asked Mike curiously, "Does it have something to do with Max?"

He nodded. "It has everything to do with Max."

"So what? Are you officially boyfriend-girlfriend now? Is that it?" asked Dustin with a hint of bitterness that Lucas didn't pick up on, though Mike and Will noted it.

"No!" Lucas said in disgust, giving Dustin a weird look.

"Bullshit," muttered Dustin under his breath.

"Did you say something?" asked Lucas.

"What? No. Definitely didn't say anything," said Dustin, acting annoyed.

Lucas gave him a weird look but decided to drop it. He turned back to Mike. "So listen, I was talking to Max and, well, she's wondering when the hell are we going to let her officially join our party?"

"What?" said Mike in disbelief. He had been expecting something more serious than that.

Lucas stopped and grabbed Mike's arm, causing their other two friends to stop too. "This is serious. *She* is serious." He looked at Dustin and Will, then back at Mike. "If you don't remember, Max pulled some pretty cool shit for us back at Will's house that night," he reminded them. "She saved Steve *and* us from that psycho brother of hers. Then she assisted the party by *driving* her brother's car and we got to help El close the Gate and save the world. *Remember?* She deserves to be inducted into our party."

"Yeah," replied Mike with a slight frown, "I remember."

Lucas smiled. "Now that El is back and we have our whole party again, there shouldn't be a problem officially adding Max. Right guys?"

Will shrugged. "I guess it's okay. She *did* help the party out in a crisis. Though I wasn't there to see any of that. And she hangs out with us all the time anyway."

"Oh it was pretty awesome when she went all crazy on her brother," conceded Dustin with a grin. "She stuck her brother in the neck like this," Dustin mimicked the scene with exaggerated motions, "With this giant needle and then injected him with some drugs." He looked to Will, with an even bigger grin as he remembered the moment. "You should've seen it, Will. It was kind of bad ass."

Mike looked thoughtful as all eyes turned to him. He was reluctant though he didn't really know why, but couldn't ignore the fact that she did help the party out in a big way and even risked her life for them.

"Well, Mike?" asked Lucas encouragingly.

"Alright, alright. Max can officially join the party, but only under one condition," Mike said, giving in.

"What's that?"

Mike smirked. "She needs to do a full D&D campaign with us."

Author's Note: I'm probably not going to have the best chapter names, so please forgive me for that. FYI I'm still somewhat of a novice when it comes to writing, so I can't guarantee good quality. All I know is I love Stranger Things, the characters (and cast!), and I have some ideas that I'd like to explore. If you feel so inclined, drop a review and let me know what you think. AN's will likely be few and far between, so don't expect me to respond to your reviews with each chapter or anything, but know that I will read them all, and any critiques and suggestions will be considered appropriately.

The story will bounce around a bunch as I try to include most of the cast in the overall story, but it will definitely focus more on Eleven and Mike compared to the others.

3. Byers' Remorse

~X~

Emergence

Byers' Remorse

Joyce Byers was leaning against the olive-colored exterior of her trusty old Ford Pinto, a cigarette held firmly between two fingers on her right hand, the smoking tip a dull mix of red and orange. She brought it up to her lips and took a long drag, feeling the soothing warmth of the smoke fill her lungs as it made its way into her. She pulled the stick out from between her lips and breathed out, a cloud of silver billowing out in front of her and then dissipating as a cold winter breeze blew, making her shiver.

The sky was dull and gray, covered in ever thickening clouds as a storm front was expected to make its way over Hawkins. The forecasters were finally calling for snow, which was late coming that winter.

She shivered again, reminding her that she needed a new winter coat. The one she was currently wearing was thinning and starting to fray at the edges from constant use over the years. Unfortunately, she couldn't afford a new one at the moment so she would have to endure for a while longer with the old coat, which wasn't too big of a deal really. She'd suffered through far worse things in her life, in the last month even.

She took another drag on her cigarette.

Money had been tighter than normal the past year and shopping for new clothes for herself wasn't high on her list of priorities. As long as she had the basic wardrobe necessities, she was content. Besides, getting her sons what they needed was far more important to her than looking fashionable or feeling extra warm on a cold day.

What meager extra spending money she had was usually spent on her

children, making sure they were properly clothed, fed, and had anything they wanted. Within reason of course. She didn't want to spoil them too much after all.

Joyce furrowed her brow as she continuously scanned the front of the school for her son Will, wondering where he was and what was taking him so long. She had told him to meet her outside the school by 2:30 pm, thirty minutes after classes had let out. She took another puff of her cigarette and then checked her watch.

2:36 pm.

She didn't expect him to be exactly on time, but he was now more than five minutes late and it was beginning to worry her. She started biting one of her nails, her foot tapping as the anxiety started to build. Taking another drag from her cigarette, she decided to wait another couple of minutes before taking action. Maybe he was in the bathroom.

At 2:40 pm she threw what little remained of her cigarette on the ground, stepping on it firmly to put it out, and then strode purposefully right into the front office of the school. She asked if they could call Will on the PA system, which they obliged.

Joyce ignored the weird looks the administrative staff gave her, the ones they thought she wouldn't notice. They could give her all the weird looks they wanted, but they didn't even know half of the truth of everything that has happened to her and her family. Hell, they barely knew about the dangers that had threatened Hawkins the last two years. They could judge her and her family to their hearts' content. She couldn't care less.

She reached for the pack of cigarettes in her coat pocket, feeling the need to light another one up, but stopped when she remembered that she was inside her son's school. Smoking wasn't allowed indoors on school grounds. She started biting her nails again.

When the clock hit 2:45 pm she felt the panic rising within her. She was about to go off searching for Will herself when he finally showed up, flanked by his friends. None of them saw her. They were talking and laughing about something as they walked down the hall past the

windows of the front office and headed out the doors to the parking lot.

She let out a breath of relief and watched him for a moment, smiling when he smiled, glad that he seemed to be recovering well from yet another harrowing encounter with that place they called the upside-down and the monsters that apparently lived there. She wasn't sure if the incident a month ago was worse than the one last year, but she was absolutely sure that if she ever got the chance, she would not hesitate to burn the whole upside-down dimension to the ground.

"Ma'am?" said one of the women who worked at the school, loud enough to pull Joyce out of her thoughts. Judging from her tone and demeanor, that was not the first time the woman had tried to get her attention.

Joyce turned to look at her with a slightly confused look. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?" she said politely.

The woman motioned with her head towards where Will had walked past then gave her a pointed look. "I believe that's your son?" she said condescendingly.

Joyce nodded with a feigned smile, resisting the urge to say anything nasty. "Right. Thank you for your help."

When she walked outside she saw Will standing with his friends by the bike racks, talking. She waved at him when he saw her and he waved back, bidding goodbye to his friends and then walking over to meet her by the car.

Joyce pulled him into a hug when he was close enough.

"Hey mom," he greeted as he hugged her back.

"You worried me again, you know that?" she said in as close to an admonishing tone as she could muster, pulling back from the hug but still holding onto his shoulders, "Do you know what time it is? I thought we agreed on 2:30?" She adjusted his jacket a little then proceeded to light up a cigarette.

He looked apologetically at her, "I'm sorry mom. We had to help Mr.

Clarke clean up the science lab before we left and I lost track of time."

"Clean up the lab?" she asked as she took a puff of her cigarette and they got into the car. She kept looking at her son with a worried expression. "What? Did something happen?"

"No, nothing happened. I'm *fine*," he said reassuringly, knowing what she was really hinting at, "The other kids just didn't put away their stuff properly and Mr. Clarke recruited us to help him since, you know, we're his favorite students and all. And we wanted to help!"

Joyce started the car, the engine coming to life with a slight shudder. "I see. Okay. So how long have you been going to this science lab? I don't remember you mentioning anything about lab work in school before." She thought it odd, since he loved his classes with Mr. Clarke and would talk to her about them all the time. For a moment she wondered if that meant he was hiding things from her again.

Right on cue, Will's face lit up like a Christmas tree, a big smile stretching his face. His eyes had this starry look about them that she could never tire of seeing. He proceeded to explain to her how Mr. Clarke had decided to make a few changes to the lesson plan for the year and get them started on dissecting frogs earlier than originally planned. He then told her all about the experience so far, which was basically equal parts cool and disgusting, and how he was looking forward to them continuing the lab tomorrow.

He always had this air of excitement when he talked about school, especially anything science-related. His genuine enthusiasm for the subject thrilled Joyce, and sometimes she found herself swept up in the excitement over whatever it was too. Though most of the time she understood very little of it. She was at least relieved to know that he had not been hiding this from her.

Ever since they exorcised that evil creature that had possessed her boy for a while, she had been wondering when the other shoe was going to drop. She wasn't quite convinced that they had really seen the last of it, or that they even got it all out of his system. Sure, the doctors at the hospital had given him a clean bill of health, but Joyce honestly had little trust in doctors these days. But so far, Will seemed

to be perfectly fine so maybe she was being too paranoid for once.

She had asked his friends to report any strange behavior or if he seemed to be having another episode, but so far they haven't said a thing, which was also a good sign. Assuming that they weren't all hiding it from her, though she doubted that they would this time around. Hopefully they had all learned to trust each other enough not to hide such things, especially if it related to the upside-down.

Will made no mention of any weird dreams or nightmares. He didn't space out or look scared at random times like before, when he was being haunted by that thing from the other dimension. He also wasn't afraid of heat anymore, having taken the occasional warm bath since being released from the hospital. The few times in the past month that Joyce had stayed with him in his room or checked up on him in the middle of the night, Will didn't seem to experience any bad dreams. He slept as soundly as she had ever seen him.

All signs pointed to her boy being in good health and returning normal. Yet she couldn't help but worry. There was a gnawing at the back of her mind that somehow they weren't clear of danger yet, and so far her instincts have been dead on about everything. Though maybe she was actually wrong for once. She wouldn't mind if she was.

"Are you okay, mom?" asked Will, and she realized that he had been talking this whole time and she hadn't been paying much attention.

"I'm sorry, sweetie, I was just... I was distracted, you know? The store was extra busy today, what with the Christmas season in full swing and all, and Donald has been asking me to cover more shifts... I'm just tired," she sighed, bringing the cigarette to her lips for another hit.

"Mom," said Will with a meaningful look, "You can tell me the truth. Were you thinking about... Bob?" he asked with some hesitation. He knew that Bob's death had really impacted her more than she liked to let on sometimes. She was smoking a lot more these days, enough that Will had taken notice. She also seemed to be spacing out more often than he remembered her doing before.

She failed to form words for a moment, surprised by the question, and then smiled sadly, "No, not this time," she said honestly but stopped short of explaining what she was actually thinking about. "But you do remember we're visiting him today, right?"

He nodded, looking out the passenger side window. "Yeah, I remember," he replied in a subdued voice. "Is Jonathan coming?"

"Yes sweetie, Jonathan is supposed to meet us there after he's finished at school."

Will leaned his head back against the seat, quietly staring out the window at the passing scenery. Joyce reached out and held her son's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

The rest of the drive passed in silence.

The Hawkins Cemetery was larger than most people would think for such a small town. There were large swathes of empty fields, vacant spaces waiting for the future dead. A few trees dotted the otherwise open grounds, the various tombstones standing in silent vigil over the interred.

Joyce drove through the open iron gates and pulled the car into a parking spot. Shutting the engine off and pocketing the keys in one smooth motion, she took a deep breath and then looked at Will. No words were said as they looked at each other, then Will gave her a sad smile and a nod. She reached out and cupped his cheek, smiling back as she took another deep breath and then turned to reach for the door handle.

They got out of the car and Joyce grabbed some flowers that she had sitting in the backseat. Mother and son made their way down the paved walkways, still not talking, both having nothing to say at the moment as they were lost in their own thoughts.

No one else appeared to be at the cemetery, the two of them alone amongst the dead. A chill wind blew across the field and Joyce pulled Will close to her. It felt like each gravestone they passed was watching their silent march, and Joyce wasn't sure if she was shivering because of the cold or because of the thought of all the

dead that surrounded them.

Before long, they reached the tombstone that they were now quite familiar with. Joyce's eyes were already tearing up and she tried to hold it back, wiping away the first signs of wetness with the sleeve of her coat.

The tombstone was a solid but simple piece of granite, engraved on the face of it were the words:

Robert "Bob" Newby
Superhero
1937-1984

They stood side-by-side before the grave, Joyce's arm draped around Will. The last time they were here was for the funeral that was held a few weeks ago, but Joyce had wanted to go at least once more before Christmas and the boys were on board with the idea.

"Merry Christmas, Bob. We... we miss you," said Will in a quiet voice, unsure of what else to say, or if he was even supposed to say anything aloud.

Joyce gripped him tighter, emitting a strained sob.

Will leaned his head against his mother's side, closing his eyes.

He wasn't ever really sure of how he felt about Bob when the man was still alive. He had liked that Bob didn't behave any differently with him than when he was with Jonathan or any of their friends. Bob never treated him with heavy duty kid gloves like his mother and brother did, the latter to a lesser extent but it was still noticeable, and it was nice to be seen and treated like there wasn't anything wrong with him for once.

Practically every interaction he had with his family and friends over the past year was governed by the belief that he was some fragile thing that should be handled with care and protected. Granted, there was some understandable reasoning to that, but most of the time it simply made him frustrated, stressed, and anxious. It made him feel like a freak. Like he was some glass sculpture that could shatter at

any moment.

He actually enjoyed most of his time with Bob, enduring many of his groan-worthy jokes as they watched movies, listened to music, played games, solved puzzles, and talked about science and technology. He only wished they had had more time.

Will couldn't really remember much from when they were all at the lab before everything went to hell, his memory was scrambled and hazy from that time. But his mother had told both him and Jonathan the story of how Bob not only stayed by their side in their darkest hour, but also saved them. Bob saved their lives and for that Will was eternally grateful. They all were.

There was one thing that Will didn't share with anyone though: the advice that Bob had given him driving him to school that one fateful day. He knew that Bob meant well when he told Will to stand up to his nightmare and tell it to go away. However, that eventually terrible piece of advice ended up getting him possessed by the shadow monster. By the Mind Flayer.

He shuddered at the thought, and for the briefest of moments he could almost still feel some part of the beast writhing inside him. But then it was gone as quickly as it had come and he chalked it off as his imagination getting the best of him.

He hadn't had any episodes since the Gate was closed and they had seen the thing possessing him physically leave his body. The Mind Flayer couldn't get to him anymore. He was safe. They all were.

"Are you cold, Will?" asked Joyce, feeling him shaking a little.

"What? No, no I'm fine mom," Will replied quickly.

Joyce kissed the top of his head then went back to staring at the gravestone. After another minute, she stepped forward, letting go of Will for a moment. She dropped to a squat, gently placing the flowers she was holding along the base of the stone. Reaching a hand out to the tombstone, she ran a finger along the inscription, tears threatening to stream down her face. The muscles on her face were shaking as she tried to hold it together.

"Oh Bob," she whispered.

Bob Newby. Sweet, gentle Bob. She hadn't meant to draw him into all the craziness and danger that seemed to surround her family the past couple of years. She warned him repeatedly that her family wasn't normal, that it probably wasn't a good idea, and yet that didn't scare him off like she thought it might. In fact, her warnings seemed to convince him that she needed him to be there.

Bob was a problem solver, and he wanted to help solve all of their problems. He had wanted to save her, to save them, and he was willing to uproot and change his own life to give them a chance to leave Hawkins with him and start anew somewhere else, anywhere else.

For whatever reason, Bob came into their life and stood there with them in the midst of the storm that seemingly engulfed the Byers family, ready to take on whatever dangers haunted them regardless of how much of it he actually understood. He could have easily left them right after learning the truth at the lab, and he could have also easily not said a thing when Hopper talked about going down to the basement to get the power back online.

But that apparently wasn't the Bob Newby way. He saw the problem and stepped up to solve it when he was needed most, even knowing the risks that it entailed. He willingly shouldered a burden that he should have never been asked in the first place. Without him Joyce had no doubts that they would have all died at that cursed lab.

Even though Bob probably didn't plan on dying that night, somehow Joyce knew that even now, wherever he was, he regretted none of his decisions that day. Because that was just the kind of person he was. Smart. Kind. Selfless. Caring. Reliable. He was too good to be true, too nice to be real. But that didn't make his loss any easier to bear for her.

Bob had been a much-needed light in the darkness that seemed to want to swallow the Byers family, a buoy of normalcy in the maelstrom of strangeness, but now he was gone. And Joyce, strong as she was, couldn't help but feel a little lost and a lot guilty.

"I'm sorry, Bob," she whispered, shaking her head and dropping the short distance to her knees and holding the gravestone to steady herself. Tears were flowing freely now. "I'm so sorry."

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"I have to do *what*?" asked Max, looking at Lucas like he had spoken Chinese.

After Will had left with his mom, Lucas said he'd relay their decision to Max, who was still at the school waiting for her brother to pick her up. Lucas also had Max's backpack with him, so he needed to return it to her.

Mike and Dustin decided to go ahead and bike home. Mike said something about chores while Dustin needed to check on Tews, his new kitten.

"You've got to finish a Dungeons and Dragons campaign with us," Lucas reiterated. "Everyone agreed that you'd officially be in the party once you play."

A part of him was looking forward to showing her the ropes, and he had a feeling that she would end up liking the game a lot more than she thought she would. Besides, this was also the perfect excuse to get a campaign going. It had been a while since they had all played, and Lucas missed it. Going to the arcade was fun and all, but playing a D&D campaign was something else.

"I've got to play that stupid game to join the party?" she said, wondering if there was another way. She wasn't really up for spending hours of her day playing some silly board game or whatever else D&D actually was. "Why can't you all just say I'm in the party and that's that?"

"First of all, it's not a stupid game. D&D is a fantastic game and it's a lot of fun. You'll see. Second of all, yes you need to do it to be officially included. That's how the party was formed to begin with. There probably wouldn't even be a party to join if there wasn't D&D," he reasoned passionately.

Max blinked as she stopped transferring stuff from her locker to her bag and vice-versa. "So there's really no other way?"

"No there isn't. This is it. Besides, I promise you that you'll have fun."

Max found that hard to believe, but if he said there was really no other way, she figured she had to suck it up and do it. She hated to admit it but she liked hanging out with them. Especially Lucas. There was something about him that she gravitated to. Besides, they were her only real friends here in Hawkins. None of her other classmates seemed as inclined to be friends with her as they had.

Admittedly, a part of her was also a little curious about why D&D was such a big deal to the boys. She knew the basics and what it was generally about, but she had never really played it before.

"Fine. I guess," she relented. She looked at Lucas meaningfully. "Don't forget the other thing I asked you."

"I haven't forgotten," Lucas assured her.

"Good." Max closed up her bag and shouldered it. "So did Eleven have to do all this?"

"Do what?"

"You know, play D&D and stuff to get into the party."

"Uhhh..." Lucas hesitated, wishing that his friends were there to help him at that moment, "Well, you see..."

Her eyes narrowed at him. "Are you trying to tell me that she didn't have to do any of this shit to get into the party?"

Lucas grimaced, "Well, yes and no... it's complicated, okay? I mean, she kinda sorta played it with us?" he explained poorly, thinking of that one time Eleven told them about the upside-down using the game board. That was the same night she acknowledged the existence of the demogorgon, and that Will was hiding from it in the upside-down. Eleven technically used the game pieces to show them what she meant, so that sort of counted, right?

Max's nostrils flared. "Kinda sorta? You know what, don't even bother explaining. This is bullshit and you guys are all assholes," she said angrily, slamming her locker closed and startling Lucas. She leveled a fiery glare at him for what seemed like the fiftieth time that day. "Be honest, do you guys even really want me in your party or not?"

Lucas wasn't sure, but she sounded almost hurt underneath all the anger. Holding up his hands warily, he tried to calm her. She definitely lived up to her arcade gamer name, MadMax. "Whoa. Let's calm down, Max. Okay? We definitely want you in our party. *I* want you in our party. You've gotta believe me. I know it doesn't exactly seem fair-"

"That's an understatement," she said bluntly, adjusting her backpack on her shoulders.

"-that El is already in our party without having to do all this, but like I said it was... different. Very different. And complicated. But if it makes you feel better, how about we get El to play with us too. That way you both get to play for the first time, we all get to hang out together, and then we're all good." He looked at her intently.

He was actually kind of proud of himself for thinking this up on the fly. "Deal?" he asked, extending a hand for her to shake.

In the distance, Lucas could hear the now familiar roaring sound of Max's brother's car pulling up to the school.

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I need to go." She brushed past him, clothes still partially damp.

"See you in class tomorrow!" he called out to her, turning his failed attempt at a handshake into a wave of goodbye instead.

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"I thought I might find you here," said the lovely voice of one Nancy Wheeler as she stood by the door to the photography dark room at Hawkins High School.

"Hey," Jonathan greeted her with a surprised smile that she could barely see.

"It's darker than I remember. Did you turn down the light or something? I can barely make you out from here," she said, squinting.

"Well how about you come closer so we can definitely make out," Jonathan teased.

Nancy let out a playful gasp as she stepped closer, "Jonathan Byers! I hope you don't say that to every girl who walks into your dark lair."

"You know there's only one girl I would ever say that to," he said as he reached out and pulled her close.

Their lips met as they wrapped their arms around each other. Jonathan's tongue pushed forward, demanding entry, and Nancy's met his as she opened up enough to let his tongue through. They made out a little longer before Nancy pulled away, breathless.

Jonathan was grinning at her mischievously and she couldn't help but smile.

He had always had a crush on her, and even with all the crazy weird things that have happened to them the last two years, he still pinched himself these days wondering if everything with Nancy was actually happening and not some kind of dream. Him, outcast weirdo Jonathan Byers, with the ever lovely angel Nancy Wheeler. It seemed like the premise to a wonderful dream, one that he never wanted to wake up from.

She brushed aside some stray strands of hair from her face and looked over at the photos he was developing with curiosity. "What are you working on?"

It was a little easier to see now that her eyes had adjusted to the dim red light. She noted that a lot of the photos were of nature and landscapes.

Jonathan turned enough to give her a better view as they continued to hold each other. "Just developing some photos I took last week when we went up to Crater Lake for the weekend," he said.

It had been an impromptu trip, their mom wanting to get them all out of the house for a few days. A change of scenery was supposed to

do them good, and though Jonathan was a reluctant to suddenly go out of town, he ended up relishing the experience. They had some good family fun out there, and the new environment did help them forget, at least for a few days, the bad things that have happened recently. They actually felt like a normal family for once.

"How's Will doing?" asked Nancy, resting her head against his chest.

"Better, I think. He hasn't had any nightmares or bad dreams. No strange episodes or needing to be cold, so it's looking pretty good." He was actually very optimistic about the whole thing. The Gate to the upside-down was closed, Hawkins Lab was shut down, and everyone was safe. Things could only go up from here, right?

"And how are you?" she asked, leaning back enough to look him in the eyes.

He grinned. "I'm in a dark room with the prettiest girl in Hawkins. How do you think I'm doing?"

She couldn't help but giggle, "Smooth. Very smooth," she said as she gave him a quick kiss.

Jonathan had to admit that ever since he and Nancy got together, he had been feeling a lot more confident in himself. Not that he didn't feel confident before, but Nancy simply brought out a whole new level of confidence and charisma in him. And it felt great.

Nancy turned to look at the photos hanging along the wall, squinting as she tried to get a better look at each picture. One in particular caught her eye and she reached out and pointed to it. It was a picture of Will standing atop a boulder that was teetering along one edge of the water. He looked absolutely thrilled.

"I can't believe your mom let him do that," she remarked.

"Me neither," Jonathan agreed, staring at the photo, "My mom can be surprisingly cool sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Nancy raised an eyebrow at him with a wry grin.

"Okay, a lot of the time," he admitted, glancing at her, "But

sometimes she can be a bit much too, you know?"

Nancy shrugged, looking thoughtful. "I think all parents can be a bit much sometimes. They wouldn't be parents otherwise."

He considered that for a moment. "I suppose you're right."

She let out a laugh. "You *suppose* I'm right? I'm *always* right," she chided him playfully, pushing him lightly on the chest.

Jonathan laughed a little. "My mistake, Miss Wheeler. Of course you're always right."

"Better," she said as she pulled away from him and straightened up her clothes. "How is your mom doing, anyway?"

Jonathan briefly looked away. "She's okay, I think. Bob's passing has been tough on her, on all of us, but her most of all." He didn't know what else to say.

She nodded in understanding, reaching out to grab his hands. "She's a very strong woman. I'm sure she'll be fine in time."

"Speaking of my mom, you know you kind of sounded like her there for a second, talking about always being right and all," he noted with amusement, trying to lighten the mood.

Nancy was going to respond with a joke but then she remembered something. "Wait, weren't you supposed to meet your mom somewhere this afternoon?"

Jonathan drew a sharp intake of breath. "Oh shit."

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Dustin kept abreast of Mike as they biked along the streets of Hawkins.

Mike barely spoke since they left the school, brooding like he used to do often before Eleven reappeared into their lives. Now his brooding moments were thankfully few and far between.

Dustin, for his part, talked as much as he could to fill the silence. Most of the time, silence made him uncomfortable, especially when around other people. So he talked about anything that came to mind to fill the quiet. While Mike rarely actually said any words this time, he would grunt, nod, or shake his head to indicate that at least part of him was listening to what Dustin was saying, that was all he needed to keep talking.

The topics ranged from whether or not Mr. Clarke was smart enough to win a Nobel prize to the probabilities of them all going to the same college some day. Then he started talking about Max.

"I wonder why Max is acting up and being all emotional all of a sudden. She's been pretty cool the last few weeks and didn't seem to have any problems with anything until today. And it can't be all because of that stupid glove hitting her hair," he said, then backtracked a bit, "Unless she's really protective of her hair. I guess she does have nice hair."

He paused to reflect on that. "Ohhhh shit what if it has something to do with her bully of a brother? Do you think maybe something happened to her? Maybe he got back at her for what she did to him at Will's? Or maybe it's really all just because Lucas pissed her off?" asked Dustin in rapid succession.

He kept talking though, not waiting for an answer that he knew wasn't coming. "But I guess she *is* a girl and you know how girls are emotional, and, I mean... we're not used dealing with that so we wouldn't really know if this is normal or not. Right?" he noted with a weak laugh and a flash of a smile that Mike didn't see.

They biked in relative silence for about twenty seconds, the wind rushing by them and their bikes clicking as they pedaled, then Dustin started talking again.

"Do you think Nancy would want to join us? For the D&D campaign, I mean. You know, like before... when she was a lot cooler?" asked Dustin, "Not that she's not cool, because she is," he quickly added, his mind thinking back to the Snow Ball when she asked him to dance and saved his night from utter ruin. He couldn't help but blush as he remembered dancing with her, and he was glad that Mike wasn't

paying him much attention at the moment.

"But, you know, she could be even cooler. Like, it would be super cool if she could be an elf ranger again like that one campaign she joined us on a few years ago." Dustin pictured the current Nancy dressed up as an elf, with the pointy ears and the woodland armor, and his cheeks got a lot warmer. Nancy, the elven warrior princess.

Mike didn't say anything.

"Shit. Yeah, you're right. Of course she wouldn't," said Dustin with a frown, shaking his head to get the image of Nancy in the elf costume out. "She's always with Jonathan now anyway. Probably sucking face all the time and definitely too busy to play some D&D."

Mike didn't respond as they turned a corner, pedaling faster to climb and get over a hill that the road went over.

"But maayyybe..." Dustin's eyes lit up as he came up with an idea. "Maybe we can ask Jonathan if he wants to play some D&D," Dustin thought aloud, "He was always kinda cool too, you know. Okay, maybe he's a bit of a loner, but he was always nice to us. And he hangs out with Will a lot and he'd do anything for him. So maybe, and this is just a thought, maybe we can ask Will to ask Jonathan to come play with us. And if he says yes then maybe Nancy might join too!"

"Ummm... no, Dustin," Mike finally spoke, this time actually casting a sideways glance at him, brows furrowed.

"No? No, you're right. You're totally right. Too many people. The party would be way too big and it probably wouldn't be as much fun. Plus it would be a pain to manage as dungeon master. I get it," said Dustin, frowning again. "And besides, we don't want too many new party members to have to explain things to, right? Right. You know what, let's just drop this whole idea since it's never going to happen."

Dustin's throat was starting to feel dry from all the talking, so he actually stopped speaking for a minute.

They reached the intersection where they would need to part ways

because Mike lived at the end of a cul-de-sac and Dustin's street was another couple of miles further down the main road.

"Later, Dustin," said Mike with a short wave as he pulled off and headed down his street.

Dustin slowed to a stop and yelled "See ya, Mike!" He watched as his friend biked away, wondering what Mike was brooding about this time.

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Jonathan was cursing himself mentally as he drove as fast as he dared towards the cemetery. He knew the roads that the Hawkins Police rarely used, and there were plenty, but the shortest and easiest path from Hawkins High to the cemetery went through the busier roads of town and he had no time to waste. He only hoped that he would luck out and not encounter any cops on the way. The last thing he needed right then was to be pulled over.

Weaving in and out of traffic, he managed to make good time as he was soon a little more than halfway there. If Nancy hadn't said anything, he wondered if he would have remembered at all. How could he have forgotten in the first place? His mom was going to kill him. He cracked a smile at the thought of how ironic it would be to die at a cemetery. Though the smile quickly faded as he thought more about why he was meeting his family there in the first place.

Bob.

Jonathan had never really given him a fair shake, so to speak. When Bob and his mom first started dating, he didn't think that the relationship was going to last as long as it did, so he made sure to keep his distance so as to not get hurt when the inevitable breakup was to occur. But one week turned into two, then a month, and before Jonathan could understand what was happening, Bob had been with Joyce and the boys for more than half a year.

It wasn't that there had been anything necessarily wrong with Bob, and Jonathan didn't hate him or anything like that. Bob had been a nice enough guy. Almost too nice, really. And for a while Jonathan

thought that maybe it was an act so he could get together with his mom, but over time it became more and more apparent that Bob was genuinely nice.

He was definitely smart, particularly when it came to electronics and puzzles, and he had had a solid job as manager of the Radioshack branch downtown. He had been kind and understanding, never pushing anyone too hard or reacting too strongly to anything, regardless of the situation.

Bob had also been very reliable, and this was probably the most refreshing thing about him considering the only other man in their mom's life in recent memory was Lonnie, who was the dictionary definition of a worthless piece of shit.

After a few months of having Bob around the family, Jonathan eventually came to the conclusion that Bob was simple, safe, and in some ways boring, which he figured was probably why his mother was sticking with him for so long. Between what happened with her relationship with Lonnie, the struggles of being a single mom to two boys, and the otherworldly craziness with Will last year, she all but needed simple, safe, and boring in her life.

But Jonathan was convinced that it was never going to last. As good of a guy as Bob was, Jonathan didn't think he was Mr. Right, but maybe he was Mr. Right Now and that was good enough. A harsh thing to say in hindsight, but he believed it at the time and didn't mean anything bad by it. Sometimes things just don't work out. Though why he felt that way was something he hadn't quite figured out. He simply felt it in his gut.

So for the last few months Jonathan continued acting like this was only a short fling, never getting too close to Bob by trying to spend as little time alone with him as possible, which in hindsight wasn't very fair to the man.

All of this Jonathan of course now regretted deeply. Given the ultimate sacrifice that Bob had made to save them all, Jonathan wished that he hadn't been so stupid and spent more time with him before he died. He wished that he had gotten to know Bob better when he was still alive. More importantly, he really wished he had

given Bob a chance. Now it was too late for any of that.

Now all he had was regret and a sense of owing a massive debt to someone he can never pay back.

It didn't take much longer before Jonathan made it to the cemetery, his 1971 Ford LTD flying through the gateway and sliding into the parking lot, kicking up gravel along the way. He was glad to see his mom's Pinto was still parked, already coming up with an excuse as to why he was late as he practically jumped out of his car and ran through the graveyard.

When he came upon his family they were on the ground next to Bob's tombstone. Jonathan halted in his tracks as he took in the emotional scene before him.

Joyce was on her knees sobbing and hugging Will, who was on the ground next to her and attempting to hold her steady. He had tears in his eyes too, his face red, snot leaking from his nose, but he was definitely faring better than their mother. Will turned his head to look at Jonathan, having heard his footsteps. Will gave him a sad smile and Jonathan mirrored it, feeling his own eyes starting to get wet.

Joyce seemed oblivious to the arrival of her eldest son, crying harder than she ever did at the funeral. The shock and denial over Bob's death had apparently worn off since then, and now she was really grieving.

Without saying a word Jonathan approached the two of them, carefully getting down to his knees next to his family and engulfing them both in a big hug. He carefully rubbed his mom's back and started to whisper that it was okay, that it was all going to be okay.